

ume's eclecticism necessarily trades cohesion for this diversity, but its articles represent well the investigative richness of this topic. Almási acknowledges – even celebrates – in his Introduction the critical problem that “a complete, comprehensive and unified picture” has not yet been “drawn of all the cultural-literary phenomena that can be classified under the heading: ‘humanism,’ ‘human’ *versus* ‘barbarism,’ ‘barbarian,’ ” yet the volume’s variety of voices layers in an effective outline in colorful decoupage.

**Karen Kettlich**

*Note*

1. Mike Pincombe, *Elizabethan Humanism: Literature and Learning in the Later Sixteenth Century* (London: Pearson, 2001), p. 12.

## Portraits for Milton

Neil Forsyth, *John Milton: A Biography* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008)

The cover page of Neil Forsyth’s new book on Milton consists of two paintings. One is a portrait of the mature poet, with long, curly locks and a characteristic look of self-confidence and pride. The other, due to its size and placement appearing somewhat like a background for the portrait, is a Civil War battle scene, featuring Oliver Cromwell in its centre. Milton and Cromwell face each other, so at first glance it seems that a Lilliputian army is

engaged in a hopeless fight against a Gargantuan, invincible Milton. This cover is meaningful in more than one way; in fact, it seems to imply the *ars poetica* of the volume. Through a detailed account of Milton’s life (and works), filled, at the same time, with as much background information as possible, there unfolds a constant struggle in front of the readers’ eyes, a battle between Forsyth and the topic which stresses the boundaries of the short book to the extreme. The imaginary struggle is eventually won by the author; however, as is often the case in battles, there are notable casualties.

The modest title of the book is somewhat misleading, since not only do we get a clear-cut biography of Milton, but most of his works are also introduced in a compelling way, with many a carefully selected quotation. Tone is instantly calibrated by the tiny *Preface*, which is a weird but honest authorial apology. The jocular voice is immediately catching, first in the confession of guilty dreams about unique Milton autographs, and then, when the purpose of the book is explicitly declared: “to transmit to as wide a readership as possible the results of the scholarly researches of others, along with some of my own opinions” (7). No illusions here: instead of long lists of footnotes and detailed bibliographies (although the primary debts – to Gordon Campbell, and to Barbara K. Lewalski – are aptly recognised), we should anticipate a good read intended for the general reader.

The 230-page-long book is divided into twenty-four numbered chapters, plus *Preface*, *Introduction*, and *Epilogue*. The chapter “*Introduction: Blind Love*” is similar to the promotional trailers popular in the world of movies. It begins with two lines from *Sonnet 23*, in which Forsyth first emphasises the emotional intensity, then identifies the numerous classical authors invoked. Afterwards he sheds light upon the difficulty of relating the overabundant historical data available about Milton to the complicated emotional background. He briefly hints at the problematic nature of Milton’s attitude towards women, and even engages in historical ponderings. It seems that no text about Milton nowadays can afford itself to completely ignore the topic of sex – it appears as early as this pre-chapter, and permeates the whole book, fortunately not in an exaggerated manner. Milton the fierce pamphleteer and Milton the master of the language also make short appearances on the stage. Besides arousing interest in the reader, the *Introduction* also tells a lot about the main focal points of the book and the chief preoccupations of its author.

The first two chapters provide some information about the family in which Milton grew up, but the key topic here is the poet-to-be’s education. Milton began his studies at St Paul’s, and Forsyth emphasises the high esteem toward ancient authors at the school, as well as the fact that, by the time Milton was there, the greatest of the English poets

had also been incorporated into the curriculum. The earliest works of Milton are mentioned, and key topics (mass slaughter, intense friendship) are noticed here, as well. Chapter 2 offers a well-written summary of the chaotic atmosphere of the 1620s in Cambridge, and Forsyth draws a dual portrait of the university student Milton. On the one hand, he appears as an exceptionally witty student, engaging in all the usual merriments of university life; on the other, even in moments of high cheerfulness, he can be gravely serious, concerned for the cause of national and international Protestantism. Forsyth traces early signs of Milton’s Protestant and anti-Royalist inclinations in some of his early works, among which his often unmentioned early tracts, the *Prohusions*, are also examined.

Together with some other early poems, the third chapter proposes an attentive reading of *On Shakespeare* and *L’Allegro/Il Penseroso*. The former is considered only partly as homage; according to Forsyth, in the poem Milton is also distinguishing himself from the poetry represented by the great predecessor. Duality is discovered in the famous verse-pair, too, as in Forsyth’s reading the two poems correspond to the cheerful and the serious strains of Milton. The fourth chapter is about the great solitary reading programme of Milton, touching upon the possibility of debates between father and son (in connection with *Ad Patrem*), and offering a fairly detailed analysis of the first im-

portant commission of Milton, the masque *Comus*. Forsyth shows how Milton reshaped the genre by putting much more weight on the poetry part of it, and he explores the sensitive nature of the venture, originating from the scandals around the commissioning family. Alongside an in-depth analysis of the language of the masque, Forsyth notes the lack of the usual Puritanical worries concerning this aristocratic genre, and he even uncovers some explicitly anti-Puritan passages. This and some other remarks by Forsyth question the early presence of devoted Puritanism in Milton.

It is no accident that the only shorter poem occupying a separate chapter is *Lycidas*. In Forsyth's view, this was Milton's ticket to the hall of fame, the first among his poems that became an unavoidable point of reference for later poets engaging in anything similar. Characteristically enough, out of the hundreds who at some point wrote something about *Lycidas*, it is Samuel Johnson, one of the more widely known and more notorious haters of the poem, who is discussed in detail. Johnson's big miss is attributed by Forsyth to the fact that he failed to "accept – or at least read across – those pastoral conventions" (50) which were already felt to be artificial in Johnson's time. The numerous classical authors invoked are listed next, whereas a close reading of the first line reveals the complexity of Milton's language. The real novelty in Forsyth's reading comes when he tries to explore

the poem's attitude towards the person commemorated in it, Edward King. Starting out from the etymology of the word 'Lycidas,' Forsyth finds a new explanation for the presence of the most intrusive passage of the poem (the interlude of Church criticism with the famous "creeping wolves"). The Greek word can be read as "wolf's whelp," and so it becomes clear that the interlude is a very carefully constructed criticism of King, who had already set off in a Royalist-Laudian direction.

Chapter 6 offers a lively description of Milton's European journey, focusing on the high esteem prominent Italians held him in, as well as on influential personal encounters, perhaps most importantly with Galileo Galilei. Forsyth suggests that even in the nest of Roman Catholicism Milton kept to his views in a stringent way, which made things less facile at times. The next chapter describes the England he finds upon his return. With his homeland shrunk in the Civil War, Milton moves to London and with all his strength tumbles into the pamphlet wars, of which an informative yet vivid account is given. Milton's satirical voice is praised, unlike the way in which the great poet sometimes becomes far too personal (adapting to his enemies' tone). Tracking Milton's intellectual development, Forsyth finds that by this time he had not only reached a Presbyterian position, but had already surpassed it, arriving at some sort of Independent standpoint. Confusion of the times is well reflected by the compli-

cated story of Milton's first marriage (to Mary Powell), narrated in a sensitive way in chapter 8.

Chapter 9 turns back to the stage of nationwide politics, where Milton performed several debated acts. Forsyth offers subtle observations concerning Milton's divorce tracts, while in the analysis of *Areopagitica*, even though he calls it "one of the greatest of all works of English prose" (89), he does not suppress the spotted inconsistencies (like excluding Papists from universal toleration). All in all, the portrait of a belligerent pamphleteer emerges, who is at his best when personal interests are also involved, like his own marriage, or his vanity as a writer, and as a man. Besides these, the chapter also provides an atmospheric description of the turbulent times. Chapter 10 again shifts back to the family matters for a short while, to depict the reconstruction of the interrupted Powell-marriage, and the way this new family life made Milton busy and tired. Meanwhile, preparation of the *Poems* volume of 1645 was underway, recounted by Forsyth with an interesting story about the misfit portrait on the title page of the book.

Chapters 11 and 12 trace Milton's activity during the most dubious phase of the Civil War: the trial and the execution of the king. The description of the events is sometimes so extensive that we lose sight of Milton for some time. Thus there is a long passage on the execution of the King and about the propagandistic book (*Eikon Basiliké*) that was ghost

written on his behalf. This is of course necessary to explain how the fierce battle between Milton, writer of a reply to that work, and those who condemned the execution, developed. A description of the general confusion is also needed to understand how Milton, first defender of the freedom of the press, becomes a censor. Forsyth tries to exempt the poet from this to the extent possible: he suggests that the job was not taken too seriously by the poet. The commissions from the Parliament account for the total blindness of Milton, which is discussed in chapter 13. That chapter also follows up the often ugly battle going on between Milton and the Royalists.

Chapter 14 explores the strange relationship between Milton and Cromwell in the detailed context of a country getting worryingly "messy." The problem of the emerging sects is discussed in brief, with some of the more extreme examples (Anna Trapnel, James Nayler) serving as illustrations. Forsyth is not convinced that Milton really did favour the Lord Protector, yet thought that he could effectively shape Cromwell's foreign policy through his important position as secretary of foreign languages. Chapter 15 is a glimpse at early plans for *Paradise Lost*, and at some of the theological issues appearing in *De Doctrina Christiana*. The central themes of the epic – free will, the nature of Christ, creation – are inspected in the theological treatise, and Forsyth draws a parallel between these meditations and the psychological depth of Milton's characters.

The book then addresses Milton's disillusionment with the regime (chapter 16). In the works written around this time, political freedom and freedom of conscience are equally urged, and Milton even questions the necessity of a division between clergy and laity. Events accelerated, and Milton soon faced new dangers when the "good old cause" was finally lost. His brief imprisonment and the surrounding events are discussed in chapter 17, and Forsyth calls attention to the consistency of Milton, who did not turn coat, like John Dryden, for example. This is followed by a chapter on the completion of *Paradise Lost* (chapter 18) in the rural retreat. An interesting idea is suggested about the structure of the first edition: according to Forsyth, Republicans preferred the ten-book-model of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, whereas Royalists were fonder of Virgil and the model of the *Aeneid*.

Chapter 19 begins with a brief description of the Great Fire of London, which is exciting and impressive even if it has little to do with the biography itself. The chapter then regains its focus and speaks of the material circumstances of the first edition of *Paradise Lost*. Chapters 20 and 21 offer elaborate insights into *Paradise Lost*, of course not in a comprehensive way, but rather following the trailer-like manner of the *Introduction*. Besides emphasising the love-story nature of the great poem, Forsyth also guides the reader into the maze of Milton's language, giving some support with first steps, then leaving them com-

pletely to their own devices. Chapter 22 deals with the final works, most extensively with *Samson Agonistes*. Forsyth discusses the parallels with Milton's own life, as well as the question of post-9/11 interpretations of the drama. The text obviously became problematic after the attacks, since it is in fact a monument to a suicide terrorist act. Forsyth calls for Walter Benjamin's help: "There is no work of civilization that is not also a monument to barbarism" (199). Even if such an explanation seems artificial, it perfectly illustrates how Milton's time and thinking are both close to and far from us at the same time. Chapter 23 is actually a long catalogue of the reasons why *Paradise Regained* could not match up to its prequel. Chapter 24 deals with some late attacks against Milton, and, in addition to a discussion of his last publications, there is a detailed analysis of the effect of the structural changes in the second edition of *Paradise Lost*. Dryden's rhymed version (*The State of Innocence*) is also mentioned. The *Epilogue* discusses the reception of Milton and his works in some detail, with a main focus on T. S. Eliot's dislike of Milton.

The general structure of the book is determined more by chronology than by the popularity of Milton's works. "Less" known writings and the magnum opus thus receive similar treatment, which is more profitable in the case of the minor works. The arrangement never questions the special position of *Paradise Lost* – all information

Forsyth provides gains its full significance by its relation to the great work. Such an approach becomes odd only when it drives Forsyth to utter questionable value judgments, as in chapter 7, writing about the early, historically oriented epic plans of Milton: “We may be glad that he did not now get started on the project for the epic: it might have been about historical heroes like Alfred – or, in a year or two, Oliver Cromwell” (75).

The author performs the task of filtering the excessive quantity of information with exceptional care, and he is apparently skilful in the creation of arresting openings. Especially likeable are chapter 5 (a personal memory of a 2008 London ceremony commemorating the 400th anniversary of Milton’s birth), and the concise history of the Great Fire of London in chapter 19, as well as the parts which offer a detailed picture of the world surging around Milton. Chapter 7 is exceptionally well-written: not only does it offer a comprehensible summary of the beginnings of the Civil War, it does so in an exciting way. When dealing with sensitive matters, Forsyth always tends to keep the balance between the extremes of opinions. For example, concerning the question of Milton’s misogyny, Forsyth first demonstrates how inconsistent Milton was, and instead of resolving the inconsistency, he maps the complexity of the issue at hand, and makes the reader ask “Could Milton have been consistent on this matter at all?”

The one quality of the book that will probably not be admired by all of its readers originates in its assumed wide audience. Since there is a constant need for explanations, in some instances they become wearisome, or in worse cases, they are far too trivial. Of course, in a work that accuses itself of “haute vulgarisation” (7) these are unfair charges, yet dismissing *sola scriptura* in the following manner is not elegant: “Only the Bible will do as an authority, a doctrine that most Protestants share, and that is known as *sola scriptura*” (72). We also receive a light definition of *imitatio Christi*: “In the *imitatio Christi* tradition that is so important within Christianity, and that this poem [*Paradise Regained*] takes up and extends, one tries to be like Christ” (201). Another problem, arising from the same grounds, is a lack of depth in certain cases. Although compared to the length of the book, some issues are discussed in a relatively detailed way (for example, the chapters on the outbreak of the Civil War) no space could be devoted to the elaborate discussion of challenging issues. Thus the reader may wrongly assume that questions regarding 17th-century English radicalism, or the English sects of the Civil War era, are settled, while, on the contrary, these are the fields in which many new results are available, the incorporation of which into this tiny volume would simply not have been possible, nor would it have been necessary.

As for the references in the book, there are not many. Each chapter contains none to twelve footnotes, but we often have to make do without specific sources of information. Mention must be made of the high number of internet references: many websites are listed, another sign that the book tries to reach those who are just becoming familiar with Milton (but are not obsessed enough yet to go to the library). The *Index* is helpful, if not always consistent. For example, the name of John Dury appears twice in the book, and accordingly, there are two references in the *Index*, whereas Samuel Hartlib, who is mentioned at least seven times in the book (always as a friend of Milton, a point some people would doubt), is not listed in the *Index* at all, and there are other omissions as well: Jean Bodin, Robert Boyle, Ephraim Pagitt to name but a few.

Altogether, Forsyth's book is something that had to be written on Milton: a short, easy-to-follow, accessible guide to the man and his works. In its two hundred and thirty pages it delivers everything it can, and more. The book is full of information, but it is also full of humour. The author is light-hearted from the first to the last sentence, and at the end of the day, one realises that he is not reading for Milton, but for the book itself. Many of the problems listed above arise from the reviewer's unjust position. This book should not be read at a desk, with full scrutiny, going from chapter to chapter, line to line, looking

for all the mistakes and omissions. It should be read with a nice cup of tea in an armchair. And reading it that way, we come to realise that out of the battle mentioned in the beginning, despite all the losses, not only did the author emerge as a victor – he did it with a knowing smile on his face.

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## **A Fresh Start**

Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006)

To make one look at an often-discussed, thoroughly investigated, exhaustively catalogued, frequently trite-looking topic with a fresh pair of eyes; to introduce flexibility into a matter solidified to the point of rock-hardness over the centuries; to open an unseen horizon before the literary adventurer; and to initiate the inexperienced reader into a world all too distant in time but ever so close in everyday routines, apparently too difficult in language but ever so exhilarating in vividness of detail and variety of theme – these are the hallmarks of the truly lasting works of literary criticism. And these are the hallmarks, also, that one would expect of such an eminent, versatile, and prolific critic, nay, *reader*, of English literature as